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PROBLEMS OF SEQUENCE IN THE ENGLISH PROGRAM.

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THE DISCIPLINE OF ENGLISH, THE LEARNING PROCESS, THE STUDENT, AND THE COMMUNITY ALL MUST BE CONSIDERED IN ORDER TO DEVISE A SEQUENTIAL, CUMULATIVE ENGLISH PROGRAM FROM KINDERGARTEN THROUGH GRADUATE SCHOOL. IN ADDITION, OTHER QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE NATURE OF ENGLISH AND ITS PURPOSES MUST BE ANSWERED. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE "NORTH CAROLINA ENGLISH TEACHER," VOLUME 25, NUMBER 2, JANUARY 1968, PAGES 20-25. (BN)

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Problems of Sequence in the English Program

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Marshall McLuhan has consistently implied in his writings that the school is the place where one goes to interrupt his learning.[1] As the English courses and programs are currently being constructed and taught in many schools, his conceptions might be descriptive of the present state of English education. Today's student often comes from an exciting, dynamic, multi-dimensional world to a black and white, linear classroom-world of abstract,, often unrelated, symbols with no real or apparent purpose. The student, with all his individual differences, also comes into an English classroom in which the subject matter is not clearly defined in either content or sequential development. How can an English curriculum be designed when it is not clear what the nature of the subject is? How can a program be constructed to be sequential and consistent, and yet allow for varying rates of intellectual growth and individual differences? How can a curriculum be designed to allow for a mobile population and yet be flexible enough to meet the needs and demands of a specific area or region How can a curriculum be designed to help students live and compete in a future society relatively unknown to us today? These are but a few of the problems which beset attempts to develop a meaningful, articulated curriculum in English.

Despite the controversy and confusion which is evident in curriculum planning, it is necessary to identify and focus more sharply on specific problems within the total English program if the issue are to be dealt with effectively. One of the major concerns around the problem of whether or not a basic program in English can, in fact, be devised that is sequential and cumulative from the kindergarten through the graduate school. But even here, the solution to such a problem cannot be found by isolating each specific issue; it can be approached effectively only by considering many facets of the discipline of English, the learning process, the student, and the community. Unfortunately, the problem encountered in developing an articulated program has led some educators to take shortcuts. Fre-

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1See **Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man** (New York: McGraw-Hill. 1964) and McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, **The Medium is the Massage**, (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1967).

quently selections of literature and studies of language processes are assigned arbitrarily. Too often the allocation has been done by a group of scholars with little or no understanding or consideration of the needs or development of the student or the nature of the discipline.

Before a sequential program in English can be developed effectively, the question of what English is must be satisfactorily answered. Throughout the years two extremes to this question have emerged. Some believe that English is simply a skill or tool subject with little real content of its own. There are others who believe that English is content subject, an end unto itself. Neither extreme seems to offer any real solution to the problem. English includes *both* a body of skills and a core of content. There are many skills to be taught in reading, written and oral communication, listening, and viewing, and there is content to be studied in the areas of language and literature. It would be helpful to identify more specifically those aspects that are clearly skills and those that are basically content. Any approach, however, which fragments the expectations of education into knowledge on the one hand, and skills, understandings, attitudes, and appreciations on the other, is shortsighted. Some kind of process or system must be found to act as an integrating mechanism.[2]

In addition to some understanding of what English is, there is a need to know what English should *do*. There is a critical need to formulate purposes for the total program as well as for each element in the discipline. Until there can be some semblance of agreement as to what these objectives or purposes should be, it will be extremely difficult to construct an effective, sequential program. In the realm of literature, for example, what should be one of the overriding purposes? Often programs are designed and classes taught from available hardbound, foreboding texts with little thought as to purpose. This or that particular selection is taught because it is in the text, or because the teacher happens to like a particular work, or because it is considered to be "great" literature.

One of the purposes that should be accepted as worthwhile, for example, is the progressive development of a permanent reading habit. In many instances it might seem that everything possible is being done in the schools to destroy a permanent reading habit. In fact there is some evidence to support the

2See J. Cecil Parker and Louis J. Rubin, **Process as Content: Curriculum Design and the Application of Knowledge** (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company) 1966.

idea that one of the main purposes (hopefully not conscious) of some teachers is to teach students to hate literature. If, as some inventories claim, only one out of four college graduates reads one book per year, it seems that such an objective has been successfully carried out. If we, as English teachers, were to set out deliberately to teach children to hate literature, what would we do? We could assign a book which is clearly beyond his reading and interest levels. We could require him to commit to memory certain lines — especially those lines which have great meaning or significance to an ageing teacher. We could dissect, analyze, criticize, and scrutinize each selection so that little real meaning survives. If we could identify purposes we believe to be valid and vital, we would begin to have a base from which to develop a meaningful reading program.

It is very difficult to construct a functional curriculum in any subject unless we can clearly state what is expected of the learner. Unless the objectives or purposes can be specifically stated in terms of behavioral outcomes, it is probable that little or no learning has taken place. The objectives, of course, must be formulated according to the needs of the student and the structure of the discipline. Too often the English program attempts to teach for objectives which cannot be evaluated clearly. Vagueness used in stating objectives leads to vagueness in the teaching-learning process.

Let us assume, for example, that we would like to develop an appreciation for the works of Shakespeare. Such an objective is important and one that should be attempted. But, how would one make an effective evaluation of this objective involving appreciation? Since the objective neither precludes nor defines any behavior, it would be necessary to accept any of the following behavior as evidence that the learner appreciates the work of Shakespeare:[3]

a. The learner sighs in ecstacy while reading *Hamlet.*
b. The learner buys a complete set of works of Shakespeare, illustrated and handsomely bound.
c. The learner writes an eloquent essay on the maternal instincts of Lady Macbeth.
d. The learner answers correctly 90 multiple-choice questions on the life and works of Shakespeare.
e. The learner says "Oh, man, I dig this Shakespeare the most. It's just too much."

3Robert F. Mager, **Preparing Instructional Objective** (Palo Alto, California: Fearon Publishers) 1962, p15.

Any one of these behavioral outcomes may indicate that the student is developing an appreciation for the works of Shakespeare and each would have to be accepted as valid. What do we expect a student to do when he "appreciates?" How do we know when this objective is reached?

It is difficult to discuss sequential development of curriculum without some reference to Bruner's influential book, *The Process of Education.*[4] His work gives sanction to a spiral curriculum, properly conceived and developed. Such a curriculum allows for review, for progressively sophisticated levels of treatment and for progressively broader coverage. At first look such a spiral approach for English seems valid and has been widely used as a basis for curricular organization. In practice, however, the instruction is not sequential, but the same each year. Instead of having varying experiences in depth and levels of understandings and concepts, the student has the same experience over and over, in language structure, in writing, and in literature. How many times and for how many years do we approach the noun and other parts of speech in the same way?

It is becoming increasingly clear that the spiral curriculum as it has been employed is not completely effective. Many aspects of English are not scientific and cannot be made rigorously sequential to the way that mathematics or related courses can. Research shows that language power does not necessarily develop in a logical and systematic fashion. We know, for example, that linguistic skills are more directly related to factors outside the school — especially environmental — than are the skills of many other subjects. It is difficult to defend any given system of prerequisites at the present time for a complete program in English, but continued efforts should be made to identify and specify levels of meaning and difficulty in language and literature.

Any attempt to structure a sequential program must define some organizational pattern. In literature, for example, some of the familiar patterns include the "historical", "types", "individual works", and "thematic" approaches. The *historical* approach, either chronological or cultural, is easy to organize and can teach an understanding of literary history. But it can lead the student to view the literary work simply as a document of history and not as a literary experience. The *types* approach attempts to focus on single works as examples of genre, but can easily lead to an overconcern with technical analysis. The *in-*

4Jerome S. Bruner. The Process of Education (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960).

dividual works approach has the merits of simplicity and directness, but often does not provide effectively for different interest and ability levels and may indicate an aimlessness of the literature program. The *thematic* approach attempts to develop insights into the recurrance of literary patterns and common problems or concerns. As do some of the other approaches, it tends to ignore the unique aspect of the particular work. With a careful choice of theme, however, it could be the most effective single organizational pattern.

It may be possible to develop a meaningful sequence by utilizing several of the approaches. In order for a program to have an organizational focus, specific structure could be designed for certain grade levels, along with suggestions for stressing certain genre and theme. The greatest danger in selecting any pattern for sequential development is the temptation to be more concerned with the pattern than the objectives, the needs, or the interests of the student.

It is becoming increasingly clear that our habit of rearranging content in deference to the periodic swing of the pendulum cannot cope with the enlarged issues now confronting us in our complex world. It seems evident that the construction of a valid curriculum in English will require a breakthrough in the traditional, pedantic approaches. A breakthrough is needed which will open curriculum design to a consideration of the multiple elements involved instead of a sterile search for single answers. Perhaps some direction will come from the promising research in the cognitive domain, but this will require the test and refinement of actual application in practical situatons.

The crucial question for the English curriculum or any curriculum now becomes: What strategy can best be used to achieve our purposes and at the same time accomodate contemporary pressures and the needs of the students:[5] A developmental program in English in our dynamic social order should make provisions for the following:

1. A logical system for selecting from the available content to to be taught must be established.
2. Subject matter, from kindergarten to the graduate school, must be so organized that minimum waste motion occurs and so that content which offers multiple benefits is utilized and exploited.
3. Subjects of the curriculum and their content must be reconstructed so that they deal with the truly important.

5Adapted from Parker and Rubin, op. cit., pp. 28-29.

4. Methods, which are based on principles of human learning, must be devised for teaching subject matter.
5. Provisions must be made for the enormous spectrum of individual differences in ability, in ways of learning, in interests, and in readiness.

Until we find some way to cope successfully with these factors or problems, an effective, sequential program in English will not exist. The English program will still be faced with the just criticism for the work is repetitious, disjointed, and not relevant to this or future societies.

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